

I rise today to call on my colleagues to join the Congressional Dialogue on Vietnam. It is founded by myself and the gentlewoman from California (Ms. ZOE LOFGREN). This group will facilitate the dialogue between Members of Congress. It will also provide information to interested parties, and it will engage in discussions between Congress, the administration, and the Vietnamese-American community.

Last September I co-chaired a human rights caucus, a briefing on the human rights situation in Vietnam. During this briefing we heard from representatives from international, religious, and human rights organizations about the status of human rights, religious persecution, and the social and political state of Vietnam.

Through this hearing we learned that there are several voices wanting to be heard on this issue, and it is our job to give these groups the forum to do so. I strongly believe that with the normalization of relations between the two countries there comes a great responsibility. Now, more than ever, it is of critical importance that we pay careful attention to the progression of developments in U.S. Vietnam policy. Again, I strongly urge my colleagues to join the Congressional Dialogue on Vietnam, and I look forward to working with each of them on this important issue.

MOVING OUR COUNTRY TOWARDS A FAIRER, FLATTER, AND SIMPLER TAX CODE AND TAX SYSTEM

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from California (Mr. RIGGS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. RIGGS. Mr. Speaker, I take to the floor during morning hour to just bring Members' attention to very interesting developments yesterday that really signaled the first round in a national debate about reforming our Tax Code and moving our country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code and tax system.

If Members will for a moment just compare the contrasting styles, the tone of the debate by the proponents and advocates on both sides of this issue. Yesterday two of our Republican colleagues, the House majority leader, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DICK ARMEY) and the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. BILLY TAUZIN), spoke to three different groups back here in Washington. This was part of their Scrap the Code tour that they have taken on the road to cities around the country.

Yesterday majority leader Armeay, who was one of the leading congressional proponents of the flat tax, and the gentleman from Louisiana (Mr. TAUZIN), one of the leading Congressional proponents of a national sales tax, a national tax on consumption, spoke to these three groups as part of what I think is a very rational, a very

level debate about replacing the current Tax Code in favor of one of these two plans, both of which, in my view, would be simpler and fairer than the current system. Again, they have been doing this around the country as part of an effort to inform and engage the American people in this debate.

Contrast their, again, very rational approach to discussing these issues with the President's remarks yesterday back here in Washington. I am quoting from the Washington edition of the Los Angeles Times. The headline is "Clinton Rips Reckless Overhaul of Tax Code."

The article says, "Facing an unexpected stampede in Congress to wipe out the U.S. tax code and replace it with a radical new system," and "radical" is the word the L.A. Times writer uses, "President Clinton on Monday denounced the approach as 'misguided, reckless, and irresponsible,' and warned that it would imperil the economy." Gloom and doom. These are just scare tactics, Mr. Speaker.

The article goes on to say, "In an unusually pointed attack, Clinton and his top advisers assailed popular legislation," legislation that is now pending in this House, in this Congress, "that would end the current tax code on December 31, 2001, to make way for a wholly new version.

"No one concerned about fighting crime would even think about saying, 'Well, three years from now we are going to throw out the criminal code and we will figure out what to put in its place,' Clinton told the National Mortgage Bankers Association. No one would do that. That is exactly what this proposal is. That is exactly what some people in Congress are proposing to do."

Excuse me? I do not see the analogy. I do not see any comparison between our efforts to move the country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code with this analogy to throwing out the criminal code. Frankly, I think most of us, the 143 of us that have sponsored legislation to scrap the Tax Code, resent any analogy or suggestion that somehow it is comparable to eliminating the criminal code.

Nothing could be further from the truth, and, as Jack Ferris, the President of the National Federation of Independent Businesses, which is trying to garner 1 million signatures from American citizens nationwide in support of scrapping the Tax Code, as he put it yesterday, what is irresponsible is a 500 million-word code, a 9,000 page Tax Code, that is antiwork, antisaving, and antifamily. That is exactly what we have in America today. We have a Tax Code, a tax system that is riddled with perverse incentives that actually favor consumption and spending over savings and investment.

We cannot go down this path. We should be able to have a rational, informed, bipartisan debate on this in this country without the defenders of the status quo having to, like the President, resort to scare tactics.

Let me tell the Members, what they are attempting to defend is absolutely indefensible. Here are some of the articles that have appeared in publications recently regarding the collection abuses and the culture at the IRS. Here is one that says new audit at IRS finds some agents focused on quotas. "The IRS Unveils New Taxpayer Protections to Limit Agents' Ability to Seize Assets."

Why do they have to do this? Because the new commissioner is quoted in here as saying, "I am concerned about the number of questionable procedural violations that may have occurred in the cases we have reviewed. I am especially troubled about the emphasis," in the IRS, "placed on improving collection status without equal emphasis on customer service and safeguarding taxpayers' rights."

"Treasury Chief Files Action Against IRS Quotas."

Another one, "Top Official Offers Mea Culpa for IRS."

Mr. Speaker, let us have an informed, rational, bipartisan debate. Let us transform the IRS into an agency that treats all taxpayers with respect and gives them the services they deserve, while we move the country in the direction of a fairer, flatter, simpler Tax Code and tax system.

SPEAKER'S TASK FORCE REPORT ON HONG KONG TRANSITION

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. BEREUTER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BEREUTER. Mr. Speaker, last March, Speaker GINGRICH visited Asia. In the course of his visit to Hong Kong, he determined it would be appropriate to create a House task force to observe and report on the Hong Kong transition as it moved from colonial rule of the United Kingdom to become a separate but integral part of the People's Republic of China. He mandated that I chair that task force.

We created a bipartisan task force of equal numbers from the membership of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific of the House Committee on International Relations, eight members total. The Speaker mandated that we visit Hong Kong and Beijing a minimum of every 6 months and provide a quarterly report to the Congress on the transition, to let the People's Republic of China know that we are watching that transition and to thereby try to protect the freedoms that existed in Hong Kong before the transition. Interestingly, the Australian Parliament has a similar effort underway.

In the first report of the Speaker's Task Force on the Hong Kong Transition, dated October 1, 1997, we reported that Hong Kong's reversion to China was characterized as "so far, so good." Six months after the official reversion, that characterization still applies.

Two other members of the Task Force and I visited Hong Kong, Beijing, Shenzhen and Macau between December 13 and December 20 of last year, and our report is effective through December 31 of 1997.

However, nearly all observers agree it is yet "too early to tell" whether Hong Kong will be greatly affected by the transition and/or whether the United States' significant interests in Hong Kong will be adversely affected. From all the perspectives both within and outside of Hong Kong, the very negative scenarios for Hong Kong which many had predicted thus far have not occurred. Undoubtedly, this is in part due to a determined effort by officials from the People's Republic of China to respect Hong Kong's autonomy under the "one-country, two-systems" formula. Despite the fact that the underlying reasons for China's stance remain the same, there is no assurance that the outcome from those objectives will still prevail.

To date, the Hong Kong people seem to enjoy the same basic liberties and rights they enjoyed prior to the reversion. However, this is tempered by the abolition of the Legislative Council and its replacement by a provisional legislature which was "selected," but not elected, by the people of Hong Kong.

Most observers agree that Hong Kong and Beijing officials responsible for implementing the "one-country, two-systems" framework are on their best behavior. Yet one overriding concern remains, and I put that in the form of a question: Are Hong Kong officials subtly anticipating what Beijing desires and not in all instances vigorously pursuing the autonomy that they now have out of a fear that they will upset Beijing? That is the question.

At least with regard to routine matters, Hong Kong governmental officials seem quick to assert their own autonomy. There is also some evidence that Hong Kong officials may be seeking to influence policies on the mainland. But on more sensitive issues such as President Jiang's interaction with protesters in Hong Kong not too long ago, Hong Kong officials may be attempting to put on a good face for Beijing.

If such attempts to "outroyal the queen" are really occurring in Hong Kong, a subtle and seemingly invisible erosion of Hong Kong's economy could be happening without being fully discernible. That is a summary of what we concluded.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to focus briefly on one other aspect of the Hong Kong transition which is of particular importance to America and being watched by this House, and I will say to my colleagues, the full report of this task force, our second quarterly report, will be found in the Extensions of Remarks for today, but that area is Hong Kong's customs autonomy.

Mr. Speaker, I would say it is a promising start but too early to judge. Indicators suggest that Hong Kong is

fully exercising its autonomy as a separate customs territory inside China. Law enforcement cooperation between Hong Kong police and Customs and U.S. Customs remains "much the same," and, according to U.S. officials, there appears to be no change in the working relationship. Nevertheless, it is "too early to judge" whether long-term U.S. trade, security, and law enforcement interests in Hong Kong ultimately will be affected by the transition.

In November, the U.S. Foreign Commercial Service performed 30 postshipment verifications on export licenses and found only one or two questionable situations. Moreover, those questions were resolved with further inspection.

A U.S. interagency team on export controls traveled to Hong Kong on January 12, 1998, as part of a bilateral cooperation agreement between Secretary of Commerce William Daley and Hong Kong Trade and Industry Secretary Denise Yue.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to look at our entire report. We are going to more fully examine the customs and export control issue, among others, when we present our third and fourth quarterly reports to the Congress of the United States. Again, our colleagues will find our second quarterly report fully presented in the Extensions of Remarks for today.

AMERICAN HELLENIC EDUCATIONAL PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION HONOREES

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 21, 1997, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PAPPAS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 2 minutes.

Mr. PAPPAS. Mr. Speaker, just a few days ago an organization of which I am a member, called the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association, or AHEPA for short, had its 33rd Biennial AHEPA Congressional Banquet not too far from here.

At that event one of our colleagues, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. BILIRAKIS) was the recipient of the annual Pericles Award. The gentleman from Florida, as all of us know here, is a leader in many areas of public policy, health care being one of them, but also in areas of public policy dealing with the Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, and Cyprus. Mr. Speaker, we are all very proud to congratulate the gentleman on that.

The second award recipient was Andy Athens of the Chicago area. He received the 1998 Archbishop Iakovos Humanitarian Award.

Both of these gentlemen are fine Americans. I am very, very proud to know them and to consider them friends and to be a member of the Greek-American community in the United States with them, and am very pleased to have been there with them and their families that evening.

RECESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 12 of rule I, the Chair declares the House in recess until 2 p.m.

Accordingly (at 1 o'clock and 22 minutes p.m.), the House stood in recess until 2 p.m.

□ 1400

AFTER RECESS

The recess having expired, the House was called to order by the Speaker at 2 p.m.

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Reverend James David Ford, D.D., offered the following prayer:

We are grateful, O loving God, for all those people who give of their time and ability by volunteering to assist others and who through their good deeds strengthen the bonds of respect one for another. On this day we praise the efforts of those who volunteer their gifts to others and whose devotion and commitment to the meaning of service has contributed to the vitality of our national life and to our community and family development. Our thoughts at this time and our prayers every day go with these good people. May we encourage their good works and may we follow the high quality of their service in our own lives. In Your name we pray, Amen.

THE JOURNAL

The SPEAKER. The Chair has examined the Journal of the last day's proceedings and announces to the House his approval thereof.

Pursuant to clause 1, rule I, the Journal stands approved.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The SPEAKER. Will the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. TRAFICANT) come forward and lead the House in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mr. TRAFICANT led the Pledge of Allegiance as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

SPEAKER'S GAVEL USED TODAY MADE WITH CARE AND PATIENCE BY DICK DIETERLE OF MILLERSVILLE, PA

(Mr. GINGRICH asked and was given permission to address the House for 1 minute.)

Mr. GINGRICH. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to Mr. Dick Dieterle. Mr. Dieterle is a retired school teacher and amateur wood worker from Millersville, Pennsylvania who can teach us all a thing or two